

In Memoriam: J. Michael Brown 1949 - 2024

My first job as an attorney was as a trial lawyer in the Public Defender's Office. One of the things that I loved about working there was the immediate responsibility that was given to the young lawyers, and the opportunity that we were given to try cases and to establish a reputation at very early stages in our careers. It was a job where if you merely "talked the talk" without also "walking the walk," you would quickly fail. During this time, I heard about an attorney and former judge named J. Michael Brown, whose reputation was unparalleled. Upon getting the opportunity to meet J. Michael Brown, I appreciated that he was not one to waste words of platitude and to bestow unearned sentiments of affirmation, but that he instead was interested in where I was working, how many cases I was trying and how hard was I willing to work to develop my skills as an attorney. Over the years, our relationship warmed and he made me feel like I had earned those previously reserved sentiments of affirmation. He became one of my biggest supporters. As I embarked upon my career in the judiciary, I can truly say that without his support, I do not know if such a career would have ever happened.

J. Michael Brown was the embodiment of someone who did not merely "talk the talk" but who also "walked the walk," and this was an attribute that he demanded in those who sought his guidance and support. I will forever be deeply appreciative of him for that and for the support that he gave me. Our community will not be the same without him.
— Judge Brian C. Edwards

I learned today that one of my favorite lawyers passed away. J. Michael Brown was a preeminent Kentucky lawyer and public servant. I attended law school with J. Michael. He had been a paratrooper in the 82 Airborne prior to coming to law school. Like others who served, he always seemed wiser and a bit more focused than those of us who moved straight from college to law school.

He was the first Black president of the Louisville Bar Association. I was active in the LBA and for whatever reason, I remember his inauguration better than any other. It was at Churchill Downs I believe. Mayor Jerry Abramson was the featured speaker and Michael was so damn funny that night I thought he should tour.

Michael served the public in many ways but was also the consummate lawyer. I found myself on the opposite side of him in a wrongful death case in which he was defending the City of Louisville. He was paid the highest of compliments in that case and it was a moment that going forward cemented my respect for him.

We were a few weeks before going to trial in Judge Ed Johnstone's Court. Johnstone was a giant of a man in many ways. Michael had requested a conference. In the judge's chambers, he disclosed that he had discovered a document that the then chief of police had previously failed to produce. He felt a duty to tell the court — it would change the defense of their case and incriminate the city for not following policy. It was great for my client and terrible for his. A lesser lawyer in those days of paper files might not have turned over the document. Michael once told me his philosophy was pure candor— it is what it is.

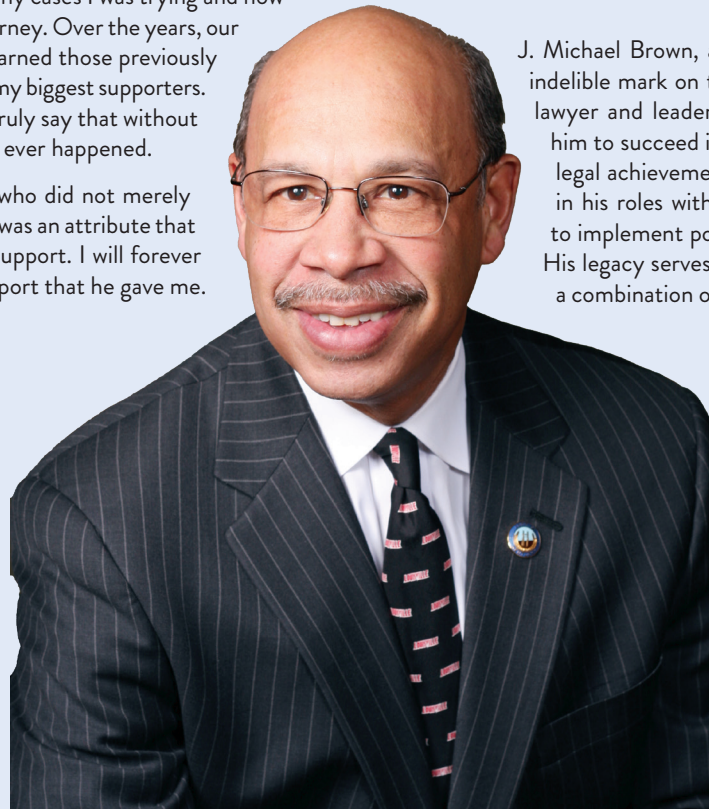
I can remember Judge Johnstone, after J. Michael had disclosed the document, turning to me and my then law partner; "Boys," he said in his booming voice (because that's what we were), "what Mr. Brown has just done will never be forgotten by this court. You should remember it too. He will always be respected here."

I could go on, but that defines the measure of the man. He will be truly missed. Godspeed, J. Michael...
— H. Philip Grossman

It is with a saddened heart that we note the passing of our dear friend and former Master of the Brandeis Inn of Court, J. Michael Brown. Michael was a member of our Inn for a number of years and was instrumental in its development during its early years until his relocation to Frankfort. During his lifetime, Michael held numerous important civic, judicial and legal positions. He always represented himself, our community and our profession well, with dignity and integrity. He devoted his life to the service of our Commonwealth and our profession. He was a friend to many and loved and respected by all. He was kind and gentle. He will be truly missed.

Our Inn and our profession have suffered a tremendous loss with Michael's passing. Our deepest sympathy goes out to his widow and family.
— Lee E. Sitlinger, on behalf of the Brandeis Inn of Court

J. Michael is one of the first alums I met when I started my deanship. I liked him and felt a kinship immediately, perhaps because we are both native New Yorkers. Put bluntly, J. Michael had "rizz." We were all drawn in by his charisma. Of course, J. Michael was a trailblazer, leader, public servant and role model. A 1979 Brandeis Law graduate, he exemplified the absolute best of the Brandeis legacy and was the ultimate "people's lawyer." He was deeply dedicated, as Justice Brandeis urged, "to realizing the promise of America through the law." He leaves an extraordinary legacy of service. May his memory be for a blessing.
— Dean Melanie B. Jacobs



J. Michael Brown, a visionary leader and dedicated public servant, left an indelible mark on the realms of law and government. As an accomplished lawyer and leader, his strategic acumen and innovative spirit propelled him to succeed in various corporate and government arenas. Beyond his legal achievements, Brown's commitment to public service was evident in his roles within government institutions, where he tirelessly worked to implement policies that aimed at fostering equality and social justice. His legacy serves as an inspiration, showcasing the profound impact that a combination of business savvy and a passion for public service can have on shaping a better society.

Brown's influence extended far beyond boardrooms and government chambers. His mentorship endeavors demonstrated a deep sense of responsibility towards community development and creating opportunities for the marginalized. Whether supporting education initiatives, equal access advancements or justice reform efforts, J. Michael Brown's life reflected a commitment to creating a positive and lasting impact on the world. His service stands as a testament to the transformative power of visionary leadership, leaving a body of work that will continue to inspire others to strive for excellence in both law and justice. He will be missed by those that called him a mentor, and I will forever miss my friend.
— Judge Derwin L. Webb

In the late '70s, I was lucky to meet J. Michael in law school. To say he was impressive is a huge understatement. From studying law to pickup basketball games, sharing a trainer for workouts at the Y or playing golf, he was always competitive. Despite the high-pressure positions Michael served in throughout his career in public service, he never lost his composure—well, except maybe on the golf course, but then again who doesn't? Our friendship was one that no matter how long had passed since our last meeting, we would start where we left off, as if we'd just seen one another the day before. Michael's departure from this world is not just a loss for me personally but also for our profession and all of Kentucky.
— Judge Jim Shake

Over forty-five years later, in my mind's eye, J. Michael is sitting in the second row of the Allen Courtroom at UofL Law School, quietly confident, friendly and a source of some amazement to his classmates. He was absolutely unflappable, no matter how tense it became with an often-overbearing Contracts professor who made many of us early 20-somethings shrink in our seats. J. Michael was not the type to volunteer regularly, but when called on he knew his stuff and more than once he raised his hand to rescue a classmate who was being pummeled with questions they could not answer. After a few weeks, I had learned a bit about his background and concluded that this older guy from NYC, with his military experience and calm, collected nature, simply was not fazed by the whole 1L experience. He was "cool" personified. As our paths often crossed over the next five decades in Louisville and Frankfort, J. Michael was the same kind, calm guy, always insightful and willing to share his thoughts when asked, usually with a smile and that little gesture where he would cock his head to the side. He contributed in so many different ways to his adopted Kentucky home and those of us fortunate enough to have known him through the years are thankful we got to see him soar.

Rest in peace, my friend.
— Hon. Lisabeth T Hughes

No one fits the definition of trailblazer better than J. Michael. He was first in many things throughout the course of his distinguished career, but first and foremost he was a true professional and a dedicated public servant. In the 40 years I knew him as a practitioner, a judge, a prosecutor and a leader at the bar and in state government, he was unfailingly honest and trustworthy, and singularly devoted to the greater good. His passing came too soon, and happened too quickly, but he left a lasting mark on our profession, on the Commonwealth of Kentucky, and on the lives of all those he touched during his time.
— Daniel T. Goyette